

Freedom

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Summary: All Chell has ever wanted is to be free of Aperture. But now that the Earth is being attacked by aliens, maybe she'd be better off back in there.

1. GLaD to be free!

I stand perfectly still, frozen with fear. I have no portal gun, no means of escape, and I have four turrets in front of me. I guess it should have been obvious that GLaDOS would betray me. It's a shame, really. She had me completely fooled. I thought she had actually changed. I thought she was really going to let me go. Silly me. I take a deep breath and wait for the Aperture brand 65% extra bullet per bullet to end my life. But then something happens. They turn off their lasers. Huh? I hear... notes. Are these turrets... singing? I don't know where I've heard this song, but... I stumble as the elevator continues to rise. I see turrets in other rooms as I pass. Then I feel the elevator begin to slow. Oh, sweet Jesus. I am in a room filled with hundreds, possibly thousands of turrets. But they're arranged like... an orchestra. They start to sing.

_Cara bel, cara mia bella! __Mia bambina, oh ciel!_

The elevator continues to rise.

_ChÃ© la stima! __ChÃ© la stima!_

I think this song is Italian. I'm not sure, though.

_O cara mia, addio! __La mia bambina cara...__perchÃ© non passi lontana? __SÃ¬, lontana da Scienza! __Cara, cara mia bambina..._

This is such a beautiful song...

_Ah, mia bella! __Ah, mia cara! __Ah, mia cara! __Ah, mia bambina!

__Oh cara, cara mia...__

I feel the ground begin to shoot up again beneath me, away from the orchestra of turrets. Suddenly, the elevator stops. I can't really see anything. Suddenly, the door opens. The light stings my eyes. Why would GLaDOS say all that just to release me into a room filled with lights? Wait.

As my eyes adjust to the light, I realise the truth. I'm free. The colours seem so bright and beautiful, so different to the harsh tones of grey, black and white. The sky looks like the reflections of a diamond; blue and flawless. Across the ground lies a field that looks like woven stalks of silk. I take a step forward from my prison onto the dirt, feeling the uneven surface beneath my long-fall boots. I stare around. I can hear the twitter of birds in the sky. The world is not a box, and it was never meant to be a box. It was meant to be this; serene peace, ultimate beauty, nothing but... world. I hear a bang behind me. I spin around. It looks like I just came out of some kind of shed. Wait, I can hear banging? What is that? The door flies open again and throws outâ€| cube.

The door slams shut. I don't make a single movement. Neither does cube. I think both of us are shocked to see each other. I know I didn't expect him to fly out of that door. Very slowly, I reach out a hand to touch him. He seems hesitant to feel my hand on his surface. I can't blame him really, after what I did to him. But I touch his surface and wipe the ash off his side. His pink hearts seem to glow at my touch. I know that I'm glowing too. I drop to my knees and wrap my arms around him.

After I pull myself together, I stand up to assess the situation. I can seeâ€| a field. That's about it. It isn't grass though. I think it's wheat? I pull up a stalk and examine it carefully. Yeah, this is definitely wheat. I chew on the stalk for a moment. Oh, finally. A real taste in my mouth, a flavour to overpower the grit and dust that coat my tastebuds. This is better than the nutrient and vitamin shots that I was living off while I was in stasis. This is real.

I feel eyes on my back. I turn around to see cube staring at me. I shrug guiltily. _Sorry, _I say, not making a sound. He seems sort of irritated. _Not about the food. Aboutâ€| the fire. _He turns sharply at that. It's obviously a sore subject. He was thrown into an incinerator. Actually, how did he survive? That was an incinerator I was forced to- No, that I tossed him into. I still can't believe I did that. Threw him into a fire. Wait, what was that that GLaDOS said?

"All Aperture Science equipment can stand up to 4000 degrees Kelvin".

He doesn't exactly seem impressed at my discovery. I can't blame him; he _was_ burning in an incinerator for years. But I can tell under the anger that he is glad to see me. GLaD to see me. Maybe I should stop thinking about that. About her, about Wheatley, about that stupid song. "Even though you broke my heart and killed me". Jeez.

I need to start on my way. If I walk far enough, I'll probably find a town or a farm or something. Hell, this is friggin' Michigan. If Aperture had been smack in the middle of South Dakota, I'd be in trouble. I go to pick up cube. He's still giving me the silent

treatment. I roll my eyes as we start to walk through the field. _Get over yourself. You wanna go back in there with her? _That shuts him up. He knows that if there's anything worse then being with the person who killed you, its being with the person who made them kill you.

2. Chell in the Rain

The sun is really hot. It seems apparent that artificial light doesn't hold a candle to the real thing. I'm starting to sweat, and it isn't pleasant either. I thought I'd like the idea of having the sun on my face, but it isn't exactly pleasant when it's burning skin that's been isolated from the outdoors forâ€¦ how long? This is a problem that I keep coming back to.

How long was I asleep?

All those vines and leaves that strangled the facility don't grow in three days. When I first met Wheatley, he said that I'd been in suspension for 'quite a lot longer' then a few months. How much longer? Ten years? A hundred years? More? It's so unnerving. Maybe I'm going to do all this walking to find out that humanity was killed by a radioactive leak while I was in a box three billion light years bellow the earth.

My thoughts are interrupted by a deep rumble. I look up. Dark grey clouds have drifted in front of the sun. I feel a few raindrops, followed by many more. I stop walking. I lower cube gently to the ground. I feel relieved as I stand up; he was quite a load to carry. _No offence, _I say to him, as I see him shoot a glance at me. The rain is so relieving and calm. I collapse onto cube.

The rain soothes both of us from our anger, our fear and our worries. I can feel cube's hearts beginning to glow. They radiate small warmth, and I feel happy. I close my eyes and begin to quietly hum a song. I don't know what it's called, or even why I'm humming it. It just seems familiar. I hear cube humming with me. And then I remember the song. It's called 'cara mia'. The turrets sang it to me when I was leaving! No, that's not all. I heard it somewhere else, too. The rain seeks out old memories. The warmth from cube's hearts feels like warm hands holding me.

A huge blast of sound shatters the calm atmosphere. I jump off cube and look around. I can see something on the horizon. It looks like an enormous blue-white ball. I've never seen a real explosion, but that's what it looks like. I stare at it in awe. It's incredible; I've never seen anything like it, even in pictures. Actually, does technology even exist to make explosions like that? I mean, maybe I'm just being paranoid, but this looks to me like alien technology.

I stare at the explosion for a few minutes. Finally, when the ball disappears, there's a blue tornado circling above the source of the explosion. It looks freaky as hell. Suddenly, a shockwave comes out from it. It goes in all directions, travelling closer and closer towardsâ€¦ meâ€¦ oh, shit.

I duck as a shower of sparks comes over my head. Each one that touches me feels like the world's most painful electric shock. Shit, these really hurt! Finally, they stop. I stand up. The tornado is

still there, but the shower of sparks is gone. Phew.

A thought comes to me. I remember something. Something that GLaDOS said to me when I was trying to kill her.

"Are you trying to escape? Things have changed since the last time you left the building. What's going on out there will make you wish you were back in here. I have an infinite capacity for knowledge, and even I'm not sure what's going on out there."

I didn't think of it at the time because I was too busy trying to not let the neurotoxin get into my head. I know GLaDOS doesn't have a squeaky clean record for honesty, but maybe that WAS true. Sparks falling from the sky?

I shake my head in frustration. I want to know what's happened! I try to construct a story in my head. Okay— there are these two rival companies, and they decide that instead of talking out their differences in politics, they're gonna take it to violence. And— they send each other bombs to distract them— and steal their secret information. One of the companies has decided that they're fed up and want to destroy their base, so they made a nuclear bomb that could destroy an entire city and dropped it on their base. No— that's too simple. Hmm, maybe the earth has been infected with a zombie virus, and a few people, only about three or four, were struggling to fend them off until help arrived, but the military just dropped a bomb on the whole city and the survivors got killed. Wait, what am I talking about. Zombies? Seriously. But this is infuriating! I don't know what year it is, where any people are, I don't know what to do!

What the hell has happened to the world?

3. Apple

My head is throbbing.

I've been walking for about a day now, either pushing cube in front of me or dragging him behind me. I stopped carrying him after the weight became too much to bare. I love him, but he is heavy.

I walked past a stream once, and it was filled with murky water. I used an old technique that I used in— well, science class as a kid to clean it a bit. It still tasted a bit weird, but it was real. I loved every moment of the water tickling down my parched throat, even though I drank it too fast and went into a coughing fit.

But it's been a while since that, and I get this terrible feeling that I'm going to die. My head is throbbing with the worst migraine ever achieved by a human, and I feel so hungry.

Finally I stop walking and sit on cube. I have to call defeat. I think I'll use the remainder of my strength to dig myself a grave. If GLaDOS decides to send those robots to "survey" the surface I don't want her to see how weak I am without her. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. First, though, I want to sit with cube. Be in the sun a bit longer. Yes, it is hot. But somehow the sunburns and steam feel better than the isolation from reality. It's sad, really. I've been down there so long, and I've always wanted to get out. And now that I've been given my freedom, I only get to enjoy it this long.

Shame.

There is one other thing I want to do, though. I've been holding it in for years, ever since I woke up and heard her voice for the first time. I open my mouth and try to speak. I want to say that one thing. I know it isn't much, but I have to say it. Before I die, I want to say that one word.

Cube makes a fizzing sound, like a radio. Funny, I didn't know companion cubes were radios. Actually, it's getting louder. It sounds like words. I can't make them out. _What is it? _I say to cube.

"Human!" shouts cube.

I jump up in shock, and before I can ask him why he yelled such a random word at me, I see the most frightening this I've seen in my life.

It's about ten feet tall, with three long legs tipped with spikes. The legs connect to a beetle-like head, which has a turret gun underneath it. It makes a weird groaning sound, and I don't like the sound of it. Before I can react, I notice movement by its feet, and I see about twelve men wearing gas masks run over to me. They all have sub machine guns pointed at my head.

Instinctively I duck and throw my hands over my head. I realise it was probably them who shouted 'human' before and made the radio sounds. Words must be hard to translate through the mask. I look up at them. They're still running at me, and within moments they've surrounded me.

"It isn't Freeman!" I hear one of them say. I'm confused by this.

"But it's not a rebel! Should we kill them?" Says another, raising his gun a bit higher. I instinctively try to protest, but all that escapes my lips is a quiet squeal of fright. My voice is probably croaky from disuse. I've always been a quiet person, but not talking for years does things to your vocal cords.

Another man puts his hand on the gun belonging to the one who wants to kill me and makes him lower it.

"Leave her." He says. This man is my new hero.

"How dare you defy your own lieutenant? Our beautiful citadel is in pieces because of your kind. She dies." Protests the 'lieutenant', raising his gun again.

"I want to take this one back with us!" He says. I don't know where these guys are going, but anything's better than being lost in a field. I think. But not all of them agree with this idea. The lieutenant stands in front of my saviour.

"You're only a metrocop. You answer to me. And I say we kill this human before it goes and attacks us! I'll bet you my life that box of hers is filled to the brim with explosives." He says menacingly. I think I can hear the seconds in my life ticking down to about thirty. I need to speak to them.

"Apple." I say.

_Real smooth, Chell. _I mentally kick myself.

"So now can I take her with us?" Says my saviour.

4. Civil Protection

The lieutenant whacks me on the back with his gun again, probably adding to my many new bruises. I almost lose my grip on cube, but I catch him before he falls. I turn and glare at the lieutenant.

"Speed it up, human!" He yells. Under different circumstances, I'd probably force him to his knees and make him to apologise. But this guy has a sub machine gun and seems to be intent on making my life as uncomfortable as possible until we reach the mysterious location these guys are bringing me.

I guess I should be counting my lucky stars that I'm alive at all. It seems apparent that this guy does _not _want me here. But he let me live, and I'm pretty sure he's met other people who weren't as lucky as I was to come with them. We left the wheat field about a half hour ago, and since then we've been walking down this road. I'm pretty concerned that there are no cars coming down this road; it points to the idea that me and my new friends are some of the only people around here.

My hero comes over and rests his arm on cube.

"I'll take care of her for a bit, sir." He says. His cheerful mood is totally unfitting in the atmosphere of the group, but it makes me feel a bit better. The lieutenant hesitantly walks away. I shrug his arm off cube.

"I take it you're from City 23?" He says casually. I don't look at him. I get the feeling he wouldn't have helped me if I wasn't a young woman, and I don't like that.

"No? Well, either way, you're lucky we found you when we did. Poor little lady like you couldn't last long out in the wilderness." He says. That pisses me off. If there's anything I hate more than being pushed around, it's being discriminated because of my gender. I speed up my walk, trying to get away from him and trip over. I whack my head on the corner of cube. It hurts like hell but I stand up with my cheeks flushing red and continue walking. I try my best to ignore the other men snickering behind me.

The guy catches up with me. "My name's Mike." He says coolly. Somehow, I don't think that's always how he's addressed by his colleagues.

"So do you have a name?"

I don't know if I should tell him my name. But he did save me, soâ€¦|

"Chell." I say flatly.

"Soâ€¦ is that short for Chelsea, or what?" He says.

"Chell." I repeat firmly.

"Well, if you're not from City 23, where are you from?"

"â€¦ Wakefield." I tell him hesitantly. I'm not enjoying our game of twenty questions.

"What do you mean, 'Wakefield'?" He says, puzzled.

"In Michigan." I say, getting irritated.

I nudge cube to shut him up. I know that cube and I are going to share a life now, but he can't order me around.

"Michigan doesn't exist anymore." Mike says. "It hasn't for years, ever since the Combine took over."

Cube tumbles from my grip and I feel my stomach drop.

"â€¦ What?" I say to Mike, my eyes wide.

"Where have you been for the last twenty years, huh?"

"That isn't important. But what's happened to the earth?"

Mike takes a deep breath, then launches into story.

"Well, it started about twenty-two years ago, an experiment went wrong in this place called Black Mesa, and these creepy-ass aliens showed up. They started dropping out of the friggin' sky. These guys were like animals. Just aggressive. But then, about a year later, some DIFFERENT aliens showed up. These guys were more like the buggers out of 'Independence Day', they had huge weapons, alien spaceships, and they defeated earth's defences in a matter of hours before this guy surrendered on behalf of earth."

Mike pauses to take a breath. I eagerly wait for him to continue.

"Earth changed a lot. About two-thirds of the population were killed, and the rest were relocated into different cities. We aren't allowed to have sex, which bites. There are about three different kinds of people: the citizens, who just live this way; the civil protection and overwatch soldiers (that's us), and there's the rebels. The rebels try to fight against the Combine, but they were doing a lame job of it until this one guy joined. He showed up and started cutting a path through the aliens like it's nothing too hard. Last I heard, he was in City 17. But that tornado thing you can see over there? That's the aftermath of the citadel. It collapsed and destroyed most of the city. And then we guys were on our way to our base when we find you. That's it"

I try to take all this in. It isn't at all easy. Aliens? I can't believe what I'm hearing. Everyone I ever knew is probably dead. My home has been destroyed. I feel a lump in my throat and a prickle in my nose. I'm not going to cry. I could hold back the tears through Aperture; I can hold them back out here too. But in Apertureâ€¦ I was

always clinging onto hope. The hope that one day, I'd escape, and live a normal life.

I'd go back to Wakefield, I'd meet a nice guy and we'd get married. Maybe I'd have a baby, maybe I'd have two. And I'd get a dog, and we would all live in a nice house with a huge back yard that the kids could run around in. My husband and I would be very happy together, and Cube would live with us as well. I'd tell people my story; maybe write a book about it. I'd become famous and successful. Our family would be happy. Cube, my husband and I would grow old together and die happy.

But that won't happen now.

For the first time I can remember, I wear my emotions on my sleeves and let the tears roll down my cheeks.

5. We've Got Hostiles

I nibble on the cube of stuff that tastes rather a lot like a cube of month-old meatloaf mixed with cat food. I'm seriously beyond caring now, though. Ever since my big emotional scene I've sort of just dropped out of consciousness. I no longer talk to anyone; I obey orders quietly without any questioning; I hate everyone who has forced me into this state, but I have no reason to do anything about it. I simply live my life like a mindless robot " although most of the robots I have met in the past aren't particularly mindless.

I finish my food and silently get to my feet. I pick up Cube and get ready to leave. Mike comes over and smiles a bit at me. I know he feels a little guilty about unhinging me. But I hate him eternally for making me feel this way about the world, and for deciding to work with the _things _that destroyed the world. So I quietly enjoy watching him squirm uncomfortably as he now does whenever he sees me.

"Soâ€| uhâ€|"

He stops talking after he realises that I'm still entirely indifferent. He shifts uncomfortably, unsure how to continue. The walking tripod (apparently they're actually called striders but I call them walking tripod instead) gives a huge groan but the other men ignore it. So do I. It groans again, much louder this time. This time a couple of the soldiers look up and start muttering to each other. The strider keeps yelling and groaning and screaming, and now many more of the soldiers are looking up, concerned for their huge monster.

Suddenly, the strider begins shooting. The sound is extraordinarily loud, and it can't help but bring something to my mindâ€|

"_I see you._"

I leap out of the way as the spherical thing releases a stream of bullets in my direction. I hide back behind the wall I came from, in utter terror and shock.

_I try my best to swallow the huge amount of fear welling up in my throat, but it isn't easy with that turret still talking to me. I

take a deep breath and look around the room for a way out. I can't believe that that computer woman did this to me! I didn't trust her before, but I trust her even less now. She basically set up a death trap for me!_

I decide to take a chance. I duck my head and hands (holding my portal gun) out from behind the wall and shoot a portal behind the turret.

"_There you are." _

_I pop my head back behind. I hear a bullet come so close I think I goes through my hair. I take another deep breath. I shoot another portal next to me and go through it. I'm standing directly behind the turret. I kick it over with my bare foot and allow myself a small smile of triumph. As the turret falls, bullets spray from it in every direction. _

_One hits me in the leg. _

_Never have I felt a more horrifyingly powerful pain in all my life. I manage to stop from screaming out loud, but I can't help the tears from rolling down my cheeks. It feels as though someone has stabbed me, rubbed salt in the wound, and stuck a red-hot poker into it all at the same time. I fall to the ground, writhing in pain. I feel for where the bullet went. I touch the wound and jerk my hand away. I take a deep breath and pull the bullet from my skin. This time I can't help a small cry of pain escaping my lips. _

But suddenly I'm not in the enrichment centre, and I'm not being shot by turrets.

But it appears that I am being shot at.

There are more people here now. They're not dressed in the weird gas masks like the rest of the people here; they're just wearing normal clothes. They all seem to be encased in a lot of wool, and they're all carrying guns. It seems like the soldiers are in battle with them. I suddenly become aware that I have in fact taken a bullet. But unlike when I was in the enrichment centre there's no adrenal vapour in the air to help fix it, like when I was shot last time and the wound healed up. I fall to the ground, cradling my poor leg in my hands. Who shot me? I can't even tell if it was the soldiers or the newcomers. But either way, the newcomers are going to die. From where I lie on the ground I can quite clearly see that the newcomers are outnumbered. Not just by the soldiers themselves, but by the strider, which is shooting at them and crushing people beneath his legs.

I've never seen a dead body before. But now I'm seeing a lot. One newcomer falls right next to me. She has a bullet in her temple, and blood is flowing into her eyes. I can't help being terrified and overwhelmingly sad. I reach out a shaking hand and close the eyelids, before withdrawing my hand and nursing my bullet wound. I'm crying now, but I don't even feel embarrassed. I think my emotions are coming back now. I curl into a ball and cradle the bullet wound with my hands, desperately trying to ease the pain, not sure how to fix it. I squeeze my eyes shut as more tears ooze from my eyes.

"Shit, you took a hit!?" screams a voice " I think it's Mike. He grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet, but I scream in pain and pull

away. Mike groans angrily. He seems so easygoing and friendly most of the time, but now I'm seeing a new side. He picks me up and throws me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Ordinarily I'd be kicking and screaming, but now I'm just hanging limp. I'm scared, I'm sad and I'm in a massive amount of pain. I can hear the bullets shooting from his gun, and I can't stand the thought that Mike is murdering people. Even though I have little to no energy in me, I reach down and try to remove the gun from his hands to stop him from killing.

"Stop, you fucking idiot!" Mike screams.

"You are KILLING!" I scream back.

He yells in frustration.

"I'm sorry, you MADE me do this!"

I feel a smashing impact in my back and the air is driven forcefully from my lungs.

6. Flight

I wake up lying on a metal surface. I sit up and groan in pain. My back hurts like hell, and I don't know where I am. Looking around, I can see that my hands are tied, and that I'm in some sort of metal container. I can hear engines as well. There are several soldiers sitting on benches on either side of the chamber and I'm sitting against one wall.

Suddenly the whole chamber moves, with the floor falling to one side. I slide down the now diagonal floor, terror filling me as I realise I'm sliding towards an open exit. I suddenly realise that I'm in a helicopter falling towards what looks like water far below. Far FAR below.

But I'm grabbed by the back of my collar and pulled back. The person who grabbed me pulls me away from the open exit and sits me on the seat next to him.

"You already tried hard enough to die, throw me a bone and stop forcing me to save you." says Mike.

"You bastard." I scowl at him.

"I'm sorry, I have convinced my cohorts not to kill you, explained to you the history of what has happened to the known earth, carried you and defended you when you couldn't walk, and then convinced my cohorts not to kill you AGAIN. What have I done wrong?"

"You're a murderer." I spit. I hate this man now. Once I thought he seemed like a decent person, perhaps even a friend. But now he's an appalling human being.

"I had no choice; those people were trying to kill me! And you! They shot you, for chrissakes!"

"But you didn't have to kill them! You could have done something else, SPOKEN to them-"

"Do you think I feel good about this!?" he interrupts. I don't reply.

"You want to know why those people wanted to kill us?" he yells
"Because the Combine Empire have killed billions of humans and practically enslaved the rest. And since I joined Civil Protection so as not to pissing off the people who rule us, I am counted as one of them: a cruel, alien creature who calls for the death of all humans! How do you think that makes me feel?"

I don't know how to respond. For the first time I feel genuine pity for this man. Truth be told, I've almost been viewing him as what he said: an alien. But he's just a man who has been forced to serve the dictators.

"Mike, Iâ€¦ I'm sorry." I mumble.

He doesn't look at me.

"No, really, I-"

"Shut up, human." says another soldier. Then to Mike he says "You know that you shouldn't be talking to prisoners."

"I can talk to her if I want to." says Mike.

"Not now. But you can chat with her all you like after she's been compromised."

I don't like the sound of that. From the look of things, neither does Mike.

"Compromised? You mean drafted into the Overwatch?" he says, sounding somewhat anxious.

The soldier chuckles.

"Well, the lieutenant actually said that she would be unfit for the Overwatch. I mean, look at her. She's tiny. No, the lieutenant wants her compromised to become a Stalker."

At the mention of the last word, Mike is on his feet. He lunges at the soldier, grabs him by the scuff of his neck and pulls him into the air.

"You're lying! She's not going to be one of them!"

The rest of the soldiers also get to their feet. They surround Mike, guns focused on him. I try to back away, but one of them grabs me and pulls me to my feet.

"Put the soldier down!" yells one of the others. Mike does not back away.

"You take it back!" he screams "TAKE IT BACK!"

A soldier places the barrel of his gun to Mike's head.

"One last time. Put the soldier down." he says.

Reluctantly, Mike lowers the soldier and releases him. I am sweating with fear. I don't know what the soldier means by compromising me, or what a Stalker is, but I doubt that it's going to go well.

I think I'm going to die.

End
file.